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ABSTRACT

The attitudes of parents toward a uniform student dress code were surveyed at a Chicago (Illinois) public school. Subjects were 15 Black parents (10 females and 5 males) and 15 Hispanic American parents (10 females and 5 males) who answered a questionnaire sent home with their children. The questionnaire examined attitudes toward designer clothing and peer pressure, uniform colors as a measure of safety, uniform dress as a financial savings, the impact of the dress code on self-esteem and academic achievement, and dress as a form of self-expression. Seventy-seven percent of parents agreed that children are pressured by their peers over clothing, and approximately 87 percent believed that uniforms eliminated some competition, although 60 percent disagreed that wearing uniforms promoted positive interactions among students. Most parents thought that uniform dress provided some protection against gangs and identification with gang clothing, and most felt that uniforms were more economical than the purchase of school clothes. A great majority (93 percent) thought that wearing uniforms helps children realize that clothes do not make the person. Parents seem to respond favorably to the uniform dress policy in this school, but parent involvement and support would seem to be a necessity for implementing such a policy. One table presents parent responses. (Contains 11 references.) (SLD)

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PARENTS' OPINIONS OF THE UNIFORM STUDENT DRESS CODE

Helen Woods and Earl Ogletree

In recent years many large urban public school systems have experienced problems related to students' appearance. Clothes have become the pre-eminent status symbol. Therefore, within many inner schools across the country parents, principals, and some school boards became interested in uniform dress code policies (The Harvard Education Letter, 1989).

Advocates believe that a uniformity dress code promotes a feeling of "oneness" among students, and can reduce the difference between the "haves" and "have nots". They also believe that it can reduce the amount of money that young people and their parents spend for clothing.

Despite the advantages of having uniform dress codes, not all school officials, and parents agree with them. The restriction of student and parental rights to freedom of expression in appearance, intrusion into the private lives of students, and lack of research to show relationships between academic achievement, positive social behavior are some of the reasons for opposition to uniform dress code. Principals must individualize the analysis and response to events in the specific schools.

The small number of studies that have investigated the uniform dress code practices in public schools, have been inconclusive. Much of it lacks follow-up. There is a need to collect and exchange more information about the impact of dress codes and uniforms in order in order to establish a basis from which policies can be generated.

It is hoped that the findings will provide insight into how parents can become involved in forming and implementing policy within their children's schools.

The results of the present study will be of value to administrators, teachers, parents and local school councils contemplating pursuing such a policy for their students.

Historically, dress regulations were not developed to teach conformity. They were established to teach that clothes do not make the woman or man. Moreover, they have assisted inner city children in learning how to dress and have demeanor needed to enter and stay in the job market.

School districts that have implemented a uniform dress code policy have put forth efforts to articulate a valid educational purpose for their actions. By all accounts the use of uniforms have been most successful where school officials have solicited active parent involvement in the decision making. Uniforms have been introduced in the elementary grades where there is least level of resistance by students. Younger students are not likely to demand to

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express themselves through clothing, and it is a good place to inculate positive values and attitudes about school.

Public school policies regarding dress codes and uniforms vary from district to district. Baltimore (MD) City Public School System is explicit in setting standards, while public schools in Chicago, Atlanta, and Washington, D.C. defer in decisions regarding appearance to individuals principals, teachers, students, and parents. It appears that these systems want to maximize participatory goverance as well as to avoid violation of students' rights.

The boundaries on the authority of school officials to adopts stricter dress codes is now relatively clear. Student attire that conveys a message on a manner of public concern is considered symbolic speech deserving the full protection of the "Tinker" material and substantial disruption standard. Vulgar, indecent obscene or insulting dress need not be tolerated. Dress that carries a message that promotes or encourages behavior contrary to valid predagogical purposes is prohibited under "Bethel". The trend in the courts supported by the Supreme Court precedent is to leave these policy decisions to parents and educators (Pugh) 1989.

Testimonials from school officials that have introduced uniforms, offer numerous justifications for their use. Increasing students' self-esteem, school pride, and attention to school work are reasons given most often. The principal in one elementary school in an economically depressed neighborhood of Baltimore offered this observation of its voluntary uniform policy.

A Maryland junior high school principal and his colleagues observed an increase in the number of students on the honor roll after the school implemented a uniform policy. Another principal noted the significant decrease in the number of disputes among students and an increase in positive student interaction.

In the D.C.P.S. (District of Columbia Public Schools) favorable reasons that parents gave for a uniform dress code were: uniforms were more favorable than clothing generally purchased for their child, to help children focus on learning, to erase some of their child's feeling of shame and embarrassment, and the need to teach students that clothes do not make a person, and to improve student achievement.

At best, the establishment of a uniform policy/dress code might serve as one of the factors that could lead to improved student attendance and achievement. Many variables impact on student achievement. Curriculum instruction, assessment methods and instruments, parental involvement/support, school climate, etc. At most, uniforms many contribute to a change in student perceptions of each other and the values they hold elements most likely to impact on school climate. Since uniform policies/dress codes may be one of the factors that ultimately impact on school climate, it will be difficult to establish a direct wear to school and how they perform in school.

In June 1988, staff in the Research Branch, Division of Quality Assurance and Management Planning, surveyed 2,257 students in grades

5 through 11 at 23 schools, on their views of the value of implementing a proposed dress code or uniform policy (District of Columbia Public Schools, 1988). Among the findings were the following: 1) students (63%) in grades 5 through 10 agreed that peer pressure was being put on them based on the type of clothing they wore; 2) students respondents (69%), at the surveyed grade levels were opposed to a dress code uniform policy; and 3) students respondents (60%), stated that a dress code uniform policy would not eliminate competition over clothes.

This study indicates that though the majority of the students admit to the pressure put on them by their peers in reference to clothes, they were or they are still opposed to a dress code/uniform policy. Students basically feel that a dress code policy whether it be uniformity or not would not eliminate competition over clothes.

In the D.C.P.S. consideration of a uniform policy proceeded via the following steps surveyed to determined interest in developing a uniform dress policy. The findings were as follows: Of the two hundred sixty-eight parents responding to the survey of parents' views of uniform policies or practices within the D.C.P.S., (236) indicated that their child's school needed a uniform policy to: 1) assist children to learn that clothes do not make the person (187 of 268) and 2) because of potential financial savings within the household (186). Parents also cited; 1) the child's concern with designer clothes over obtaining good grades (196) and/or 2) parents' belief that students without designer clothes were ridiculed by their classmates (152) as concerns. This item indicated the existence of statistically significant differences by levl with parents of junior high school students most often citing, those responses (76%).

This study shows that over half the parents who participated in the survey expressed the need for a uniform dress code policy and indicated the reasons why such a policy was important to them, and their objectives for wanting to implement them with the children. It also shows that parents would like to help their children find more profound ways to express themselves as individuals.

Philadelphia was one of the first large urban school districts to establish a uniform dress code. Parents, teachers, and students apparently felt that competition was serious enough to merit action. On the basis of an evaluation study that was conducted, after research on the topic of public school dress codes, the findings were documented in an official school report (1989). The findings showed that 91% of the parents who were surveyed in one elementary school indicated that the dress code enhanced the schools image. Eighty-eight percent (88%) of the responding parents agreed with the policy and felt it lessened (they felt) competition and peer pressure to dress a certain way. Eighty-one (81%) of the parents felt that the dress code would save them money on clothes shopping.

The overwhelming majority of the teachers who were surveyed at the pilot site felt that students were proud to wear the school colors, and the policy de-emphasized student dress competition. It is difficult to test the validity of such a persective, (51%) of the students who responded to the evaluation indicated that wearing a school uniform did not affect their behavior. Based on follow-up interviews conducted by the principal, it was further determined

that the students generally believed that they already behaved well in school, therefore wearing a school uniform had no impact on their behavior.

This study gave an implicit assumption, particularly among teachers, parents, and policymakers, that school uniforms would contribute to an improved school climate.

Research studies included in this research shows that parents have opinions favoring a uniform dress code with the two foremost reasons being competitiveness among the children and their peers to wear the latest designer fashions, and the expense that they can save on school clothes.

Parents, teachers, and administrators do not appear to have an overall objectives of the dress policy. Parents seem to be more concerned about the competitiveness in dressing their children, and educators seem to be more concerned with students conforming to the goals of the school and enhancing the educational climate. While all concerns are valid, everyone involved should consider the importance of junior high school students' input and how these concerns affect them.

Studies also reveal that it would be easier to implement a uniform dress code with children in the elementary level than junior high school because the younger children are less active in expressing themselves through their clothing.

There is a need for additional research on how parents feel about a student uniform dress code.

PROCEDURES

Population/Sample

The population in this study includes the available sample of thirty Chicago Public Elementary School parents of Black and Hispanic origin. They are composed of 15 Blacks (10 females and 5 males) and 15 Hispanics (10 females and 5 males) from middle and low socioeconomic status communities.

The sample was administered the questionnaire which was sent home with the children. The questionnaire was collected. Follow-up phone calls were made to the sample who had not returned the questionnaire. Completed questionnaires were placed in a collection.

Instrument:

Woods' (1993) "Chicago Public Parents' Opinions of Uniform Dress Code Survey Questionnaire" was administered to parents to measure their opinions of the uniform dress code policy in their school.

The questionnaire was divided into five categories.

1. Designer clothing and peer pressure.
2. Uniform colors as a measure of safety.
3. Uniform dress as a financial savings on the purchase of school clothing.
4. The impact of uniform dress code on self-esteem and academic achievement.
5. Dress as a form of self-expression.

There was a total of twenty statements the first category contained four statements, the second category contained one statement, the third category contained seven statements, and the fifth category contained three statements.

RESULTS

Findings were tabulated in percentages and the chi square test was employed at the .05 level of significance. Responses to the twenty item questionnaire are in Table 1. The data in the table show that the majority of parents agree with the uniform dress code policy in their school.

Findings show that 77% of parents agree that children are pressured by their peers over the type of clothes they wear, 74% believed that children are sometimes ridiculed about their clothes. Although 87% of parents believed that wearing uniforms eliminated some competition over clothes, 60% disagreed that wearing uniforms promoted positive interaction between children and their peers.

In regards to safety, the majority (80%) believed that wearing uniforms provided some degree of safety. The thirty parents (15 Blacks and 15 Hispanics) who participated in this study reside in an area where gang crime activity is high (emphasis' placed on certain clothes and colors) which gives indication as to why the majority (77%) considered the uniform dress code policy provided some measure of safety against gangs.

In the section of the questionnaire that dealt with financial savings on school clothing, the majority (80%) of parents believed that buying uniforms provided potential financial savings on the purchasing of school clothes. Eighty percent believed that buying uniforms was less expensive than buying street clothes, and 84% agreed that uniforms were easier and more economical to maintain than regular street clothes. The majority (84%) also agreed that children are becoming consumers early in life and are influenced through media manufactures and advertisements.

Seven questions were asked regarding the impact that the uniform dress code has had on children's self-esteem and achievement. Responses in this section indicated that a great majority (93%) believed that a uniform dress code policy helps to assist children in learning that clothes do not make a person. Seventy percent believed that wearing uniforms can promote a feeling of oneness. Sixty percent agreed that their child focussed more attention on learning and studying, and 80% agreed that wearing uniforms promoted good conduct. Results also demonstrate that parents (60%) have seen some effect on the uniform dress code policy on their child's attitude toward school. Parents specifically agreed (93%) that the uniform dress code policy helps to assist children in learning that clothes do not make a person.

The final section of the questionnaire was concerned with dress as a form of self-expression. Eighty-four percent accepted the uniform colors, and seventy-seven percent disagreed that wearing uniforms restricted their child's freedom of expression in appearance and that wearing uniforms was an intrusion into the private lives of the students.

TABLE I
RESPONSES TO UNIFORM DRESS CODE QUESTIONNAIRE

N=30 A=Agree B=Disagree C=Uncertain

A	B	C	
23	4	3	
77%*	13%	10%	1. There is peer pressure based on the type of clothes children wear.
26	3	1	
87%*	10%	3%	2. The uniform dress code helps to eliminate some of the competition over clothes children wear.
22	4	4	
74%*	13%	13%	3. Sometimes children are ridiculed by peers over the type of clothes they wear.
10	12	2	
33%	60%*	7%	4. Wearing uniforms promotes positive interaction between peers.
23	4	3	
77%*	13%	10%	5. Wearing uniforms provides some degree of safety against gangs.
24	4	2	
80%*	13%	7%	6. Uniforms provide potential financial savings on school clothes for the future, as prices on clothes continue to increase.
24	4	2	
80%*	13%	7%	7. Buying uniforms is less expensive than buying regular street clothes.
25	5	0	
84%*	16%	0%	8. Uniforms are easier and more economical to maintain than regular street clothes.
25	5	0	
84%	16%	0%	9. Children are becoming consumers at an early age.
26	4	0	
87%*	13%	0%	10. Children are influenced by peers, media manufactures, and advertisements.
24	4	2	
80%*	13%	7%	11. The uniform dress code policy should be considered as a way to promote self-esteem.
18	7	5	
60%*	24%	16%	12. He/She appears to focus more attention on learning and studies.
18	6	6	
60%*	20%	20%	13. His/Her attitude toward school has changed since the implementation of the dress code.
18	10	2	
60%*	33%	7%	14. Wearing uniforms helps deter a child's concern with designer clothes over obtaining good grades.

24	6	0	
80%*	20%	0%	15. Wearing uniforms promotes good conduct.
28	2	0	
93%	7%	0%	16. The uniform dress code policy helps to assist children in learning that clothes do not make a person.
21	3	6	
70%*	10%	20%	17. Wearing uniforms can promote a feeling of oneness.
2	23	5	
7%	77%*	16%	18. Wearing uniforms restrict freedom of expression in appearance.
5	23	2	
16%	77%*	7%	19. Wearing uniforms is an intrusion into the private lives of students.
25	5	0	
84%*	16%	0%	20. The uniform colors are acceptable.

***Significance at the .05 level.**

DISCUSSION

The findings showed there was no statistically significant difference in responses among parents on their opinions of the uniform dress code policy. The parents appear to accept the uniform dress in their school based on favorable responses in each section of the questionnaire.

A majority of parents (60%) did not believe that a uniform dress promoted positive interaction between students and their peers. In contrast to parents' opinion, Stevenson (1991) found through interviews with principals in the Baltimore, Md. Public Schools (implementing a uniform dress code policy) a decrease in the number of disputes among students and an increase in positive student interaction.

A review of the literature on public school parents' opinion of uniform dress code policy revealed that there were no conclusive evidence of positive or negative opinions. Findings revealed that a majority of parents favored a uniform dress code policy in order to eliminate some of the competition over clothes. Wesley (1992) found through a survey on parents' opinions of school dress policies that parents (Philadelphia Public Schools) generally believed that a uniform code lessened competition and peer pressure to dress a certain way. Students were administered a questionnaire to determine their opinions if a uniform dress code policy would eliminate competition over clothes. Findings showed that students admitted to the pressure put on them by their peers in reference to the clothes they wore.

On the issue of financial savings, parents believed uniforms were more economical. Stevenson (1991) found that parents generally believed that uniforms cost less than regular street clothes. The majority felt advertisements had too much influence on their children to purchase designer clothes.

Parents believed that wearing uniforms should be considered in promoting self-esteem, focussing on learning and obtaining good grades. Jennings (1989) found through "Principals' Opinion Poll on the Impact Uniform Dress Code" that it was difficult to determine the impact because of all the variables to be considered in student achievement.

Seventy-seven percent disagreed that wearing uniforms was an intrusion into the students' private lives, and seventy-seven percent also disagreed that wearing uniforms restricted freedom of expression in appearance. East (1992) found that parents expressed a need for a uniform dress code as one way to help their children find a more profound way to express themselves as individuals.

In summary, parents feel objectively about the uniform dress code policy in their school. Parents, administrators, and local school councils will encounter less obstacles in trying to introduce a uniform dress code policy in their school district. Findings indicate that before school districts can successfully implement a uniform dress code policy in their schools, they will need to obtain the active involvement and support of parents.

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